

ABSTRACT MOMENTS OF ART FOUND IN THE ORDINARY

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This paper is an experiment using Digital Video to locate and identify the abstract in everyday life and nature. The abstract moment occurs when the image that is captured by video loses its connection with the original context, allowing the images to be viewed in an entirely new way. The abstract moment is initiated by a transformative instant, that instant in which perception is altered and the viewer sees the intended content of composition of light and sound. The project contains four Digital Videos that record the artist's progress and interests.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As a result of a period of dissatisfaction with my steel sculpture's increasing irrelevance, I took a sabbatical from commercial values and production and returned to the University of North Texas (UNT) to work on a Master of Fine Arts. Rather than a peaceful transition, this was a disorienting journey. In the past my sculpture drew from archetypal ideas, ethnographic characters, and symbols to create sculpture. A storyteller in steel, I attempted to overlay and integrate myth, subconscious imagery and history in a narrative and semiotic manner with steel. Because I carefully planned and executed, these sculptures were not spontaneous.

My sculpture ideas began to include time, color, pattern, motion, participation of an audience and light, but the flatness of steel had become too limiting a medium for these new concepts.

By reading the words of the beat, minimalist and postmodern artists who rebelled against traditional structures and invented and re-invented their own expanded structure, I became convinced that installation art and performance art are not fully realized. The beat film by Alfred Leslie and Robert Frank *Pull My Daisy*¹, an enchanting stream of consciousness movie, is like a poet's car ride through a city with only ordinary life intruding. A theater of real unadorned life might have a meaning and place in my new art, and this theater may be a way to slow down our experience to see more closely the significant moments in ordinary life. John Cages' ideas of chance and indetermination were stimulating. He used random ambient sound and life as part of

¹Ray Carney, "Beat Culture and the New America. No Exit", (1999-2000), Boston University. Retrieved October 11, 2002 from <http://people.bu.edu/rcarney/beatmov/daisy.htm>.

his compositions 4'33"². The wind in the trees, bird noise, coughs and anger of the audience, the sight and sound of the piano being opened and closed are equal in meaning within the composition.

Events by Fluxus and Yoko Ono triggered further thought concerning art documentary performance and about using time, spontaneity, audience and place. In 2001, Yoko Ono was commissioned by the Walker Art Center to create a new work that utilized the telephone. I participated by standing on a dam on the border of Texas and Oklahoma while using a personal communications device to leave a recording on a machine in Wisconsin. These recordings were edited in New York and presented globally as a work of art. The idea coalesced in my mind that art can be made of anything, anywhere, in any time.

A typical portrait by Chuck Close³ removes the mystery from the subject by showing warts and hairy ears. Unsentimental, his paintings present an unvarnished truth. The camcorder can do the same by capturing all of the moment included in the recording. The editor selects footage that fulfills the criteria of the art, and in my case abstracted movement and pattern, selected from nature and ordinary life.

Using a digital camera, I photographed and manipulated visual oddities like a fire dancer whose motions made me dream of video. Conversations with other students and my professors helped me realize a leap to video was possible and logical.

Video, being similar to television, presents content in a manner to which people are accustomed. In addition to capturing the spontaneous moment with the camcorder, a more substantial editing could be undertaken later. In video, inadvertent content exists along with

² John Cage and 4'33", "The Sounds of Silence". Larry Solomon 2002. Retrieved October 11, 2002 from <http://solo1.home.mindspring.com/4min33sec.htm>.

³ Chuck Close, Staci Boris MCA, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1999. Retrieved October 11, 2002 from http://www.mcachicago.org/MCA/exhibit/past/Close/Cur_body.html.

narrative content. The editing process is used to mediate the experience of the audience by selecting what is meaningful and worthy of presentation. Video seems to be amenable to re-visiting and re-selecting content and imagery surprising the editor with unforeseen connections. Video's unpredictability and uncertainty encourages spontaneity, enabling new insights to be gained during editing and review.

Statement of Problem

My new body of work concentrates on the exploration of digital video technology in the making of art. I focused the lens on the abstract moment in ordinary life as captured by the camcorder, at the moment when the motion, color, and optical patterns interact to create an effect or event worthy of attention.

Questions

1. What is the role of chance and indeterminacy in making Art video?
2. What can the role be of spontaneity in an artwork that uses video?
3. Video Home System (VHS), QuickTime⁴ and DV tapes are possible formats to present the art videos. In what method of use are they most effective?

Methodology

I produced three videos, *Shidoni*, *Under a bridge in Fort Worth*, and *Rio Grande, Taos* that included time, motion, light, dark, and abstract pattern studies using available light. A Canon⁵ XL1S camcorder and an Apple⁶ G4, 667 megahertz Titanium PowerBook were my primary tools of digital capture and editing. The movies were produced in three formats; VHS (home video), QuickTime formats for compressed digital electronic distribution, and as a

⁴ <http://www.QuickTime.com>

⁵ <http://www.Canon.com>

⁶ <http://www.Apple.com>

broadcast quality digital master tape. I kept a journal, installed an exhibition of videos and wrote a paper.

CHAPTER 2

DEFINING THE ABSTRACT MOMENT

The abstract moment occurs when the image that is captured by video loses its connection with the original context, allowing the images to be viewed in an entirely new way. What I see with my eyes is only part of the information that is captured by the camcorder. Optical anomalies resulted from experimenting with selecting and divorcing the digital video subject from its usual context and location. New relationships were formed and discovered among dissimilar ordinary experiences.

The abstract moment is initiated by a transformative instant, that instant in which perception is altered and the viewer sees the intended content of my composition of light and sound. The transformative instant is not a fixed point in time but seems to be a relational moving point on the video timeline that indicates the audience's entrance and engagement in the abstract moment.

Relationships are found which link the three videos. The abstracted movement of light and water in *Rio Grande, Taos* has a flow similar to the pouring bronze of *Shidoni*. The over-racing clouds in *Under a Bridge in Fort Worth* mimic and recall the reflections and debris under-racing a bridge in *Rio Grande, Taos* and the boiling impurities that discolor the molten flow of metal in *Shidoni*. Water, clouds and molten bronze share the qualities and laws of fluids. Fluid dynamics reveals and organizes the splendor of these natural flows, allowing the artist and the viewer to experience a distorted yet harmonious event. Wind that propels the clouds in *Under a bridge in Fort Worth*, whips the trees and grasses into motion in *Rio Grande, Taos* by being forced through a pipe and blended with fire to melt the bronze in the short movie *Shidoni*.

The three videos are projected as large format abstract paintings that include: motion and time, accuracy, and are truthful and surprising unadorned portraits of places and moments. No affectation, effect, or filter modifies the video information, only the selection, scale, and isolation of perceived beauty are important.

What is the role of chance and indeterminacy in making Art video?

All three films allowed chance and indetermination to determine how, where and what was recorded. When arriving at a random attractive destination, I would turn on the camera and start composing through the lens. In *Shidoni* the human eye was overwhelmed by the glare of the flaming metal, but the camera iris was adjusted to compensate for the glare and intensity, thus unsuspected detail was revealed. The digital camera sees in ways the human eye cannot; the optic nerve is flooded with generalized information, while the digital eye sees and captures incredible detail.

Inadvertent content is found in these details. The framing through the lens determines what is of interest in the landscape by eliminating everything that is not encompassed by the digital eye. The camera is an information filter and the artist is the mediator of selected content for the audience. Difference was discovered between what can be seen on the 1.5-inch camcorder view screen and what clear detail was recorded when the digital information was viewed on a wall screen. The abstracted video patterns and optical effects became a uniquely detailed portrait of that time and place (*Rio Grande, Taos* was initiated with four hours of recording at the Taos Junction of the Rio Grande commencing at 6:00 am on June 15, 2002). Immediate editing supported the maintenance of conceptual focus and point of view. Concept to compression, the process of making these digital movies was completed within 24 hours. Studying the landscape of ordinary life so closely gave me new appreciation for the activities that flow about us in the

unperceived background.

What can be the role of spontaneity in an artwork that uses video?

In all three movies the abstract moment was located first and recorded in the field. Later in the studio, while editing the collection of images the connections became apparent and the composition emerged. There is no blueprint, fixed course, or method in my process only the imperatives of ideas and intuition.

Spontaneity relieved me of anticipatory anxiety. Arriving at the potential locations of beauty I would become aware of rightness. My role was to be sensitive to nuances of light and composition and be ready to capture and delineate the significant content. I find that the transformative instant is also a spontaneous instant, different and individual in each viewer's response.

The accidental and not so perfect recording is as important as the perfect; all are part of the inexact encapsulation of idea. As with Cage's compositions, what happens in, around, and during the art making is a part of the art. Spontaneous moments allow another layer of content that cooperates with the intended content. Uncontrollable nature, involved with doing what nature does, provides surprising details that add to the texture, staging and scope of the movies. By embracing the idea of not being completely in control of all elements of these movies, (deliberate indeterminacy) improvisational relationships were initiated that helped these compositions to be greater than the sum of their parts.

A spontaneous, unplanned effect was the hypnotic viscerality (gut soothing) of the abstracted patterns of water in *Rio Grande*, *Taos* and *Under a bridge in Fort Worth* on the audience's emotions. At the studio exhibition, the audience's serene reaction to water and wind videos was enlightening and emboldening to me as the composer. "I wish I was there right now"

has been the most remarked phrase heard from my audience, accompanied by a sigh. This effect was not planned or even considered during the construction of my composition, but was discovered only by including the audience, the artist and the moment.

VHS, QuickTime and DV tapes are possible formats to present the art videos.

In what method of use are they most effective?

Video Home System (VHS) is the common denominator of digital and analog presentation. Almost everyone has a Video Cam Recorder (VCR) to play and record VHS. With VHS the audience sees and hears the same colors and audio as edited. A recent video festival had a variety of computers, software, monitors, and plasma screens that displayed VHS, Digital Versatile Discs (DVDs) and Compact Discs (CDs). The variants in technology caused system conflicts that ruined the clarity of movies. Only the pedestrian VHS worked right every time. VHS uses no computer memory; so long sequences can be viewed immediately without waiting for a downloaded file. I can achieve the minimal effect of multi-screen viewing by using multiple VCRs. This is the affordable format with which to experiment and perform. *Under a bridge in Fort Worth* and *Rio Grande, Taos* are presented with two screens using VHS.

Today's digital movie software has replaced linear editing (snip and splice) with what is called nonlinear/ non-destructive editing. By using digital selected copies of video sequences to assemble a movie, a laptop computer today replaces million-dollar editing studios. When completed, the digital movie can be stored in a Web site available to download or view, distributed in a compressed version by e-mail, left in the computer hard drive, recorded on disk or processed for film distribution.

Electronic mail (e-mail) courtesy in sending videos is crucial because you can cause problems for your audience with large files. *Shidoni* is an attempt to make a small file that

quickly loads as an e-mail that is short in time but loaded with content. *Shidoni* a 30-second QuickTime 716K video arrives in most mailboxes, but a 3-minute version of *Taos* at 2900K, video is blocked. The 2900K movie requires an unacceptable 10 minutes of computer time to load. QuickTime creates movies in three compression formats; (1) full screen format files at 30 frames per second, (2) 4" x 5" screen at 15 frames per second, best for computer file sharing; and (3) 2" x 2", screen at 7 frames per second, suitable for email. Mini Digital Video (DV) tape as used by the digital camcorder has been superseded by Firewire technology that attaches portable hard drives directly to the camera eliminating the need for tapes of any kind. DV tape will continue to be used for archives, masters and originals and may have similar technological longevity as VHS. Cost of tape quickly amortizes a mobile hard drive with one hundred hours of re-useable storage capacity. The Canon XL1s is the first commercial camcorder to use this technology. This camera body is mated to an internal digital audio recording system that is advanced and as capable as the lenses, providing superior fidelity and audio clarity.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

Re-described as a composer, I now use ideas, objects, space and emerging technology to create an ephemeral opera of untraditional elements that includes the interaction of indeterminacy, spontaneity, ordinary life, music, ambient sound, audience presence, video, computers, nature, and performance.

The study of the abstract patterns yielded experiential insights that are now part of my ideas to be used in future videos. Video experimentation directly connects the ideas I could not pursue as a young artist with the experiences and resources of maturity to develop a new complex personal expression. It was discovered through the experience of displaying these movies that the abstract moment was revealed to have structure, a beginning or transformative instant that enters the abstract moment and a similar transformation back into the ordinary. The mind and eye struggle to reconcile the abstract moment with their internal references, and our physiological grasp of the abstract moment is tenuous.

Continuing to be fascinated with older artists, their work, their humanness and their practice, in the future, I intend to make a series of videos portraying artists and musicians in their studio. Narrative video can absorb and utilize the research of the abstraction studies. I theorize there is a corollary abstract moment to be found in documenting artists at their work. Two sorts of portraits of people and places have become important in these videos. One presentation is the de-mystified image like a Chuck Close painting, a time consuming, detailed video like *Rio Grande*, *Taos* that overwhelms with perceivable content. The other is a 30 second elegant video construct with a closer relationship to a short formulaic Japanese poem, the haiku. Ironically, the complex portrait like *Rio Grande*, *Taos* tends to fade quickly into the background of an

exhibition, while the small haiku-like video *Shidoni* glitters as an e-mail jewel. Additionally, this research has changed the way I use the backgrounds of my portraits, by elevating the importance of selected visual details as the lessons of the abstract moment are incorporated into the experimental ambient narrative.